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## Happiness and the Art of Life:

Diagnosing the psychopolitics of wellbeing

M.Greco & P.Stenner

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## Abstract

Building upon the idea of a psychology without foundations and on vitalist approaches to health, the paper presents the concepts of 'joy' and of 'gay science' as theoretical points of contrast to Seligman's 'happiness' and 'positive psychology'. Defined by Spinoza and Nietzsche as the feeling of becoming more active in the world, *joy* emphasises the embodied connection between self and world. By contrast, we propose, a defining characteristic of the contemporary happiness *dispositif* is precisely the feature of splitting the subject from their world; of treating feelings and desires as purely internal, individual and subjective affairs; and of effectively cutting people off from any of their powers that do not correspond to a limited mode of entrepreneurial subjectivity and practice.

**Keywords:** *positive psychology; governmentality; affect; wellbeing; joy*

# Happiness and the Art of Life:

## Diagnosing the psychopolitics of wellbeing

M.Greco & P.Stenner

### I. Introduction

Notions of happiness, wellbeing and quality of life have become a significant crystallization point in what Foucault would have called a *dispositif*, or an apparatus or device of power. Whilst this development has long historical roots, it is only since the late 1990s that it has congealed into something recognizable as such an apparatus, comprising different elements that have already received copious commentary, both within academic literature and by a range of stakeholders in wider forums such as openDemocracy. The elements of this *dispositif* include:

a) The rise in relevance, legitimacy and influence of an economic discourse that explicitly juxtaposes and relates a monetary calculus with a psychological calculus of happiness (Layard, 2005; Schwartz, 2004; Easterbrook, 2003; Myers, 2000). The ‘Easterlin paradox’ (after the economist Richard Easterlin, who observed that beyond a minimum income threshold increased affluence does not predict increased happiness) is exemplary here, and features centrally in much recent political debate;

b) The rapid and widespread emergence of positive psychology as a new and highly influential paradigm of scientific psychology (Seligman 1998, 2002; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This paradigm proposes optimism training and other practical techniques for accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative, and has fed into a notable tendency to mix the psychological and the economic by way of new metaphors such as mental and psychological ‘capital’ (e.g. Kidd, 2008; Knowledge@Wharton, 2009);

c) A concerted political effort to establish indices of ‘happiness’ to supplement purely economic indices such as Gross Domestic Product as a basic political target (e.g. Marks & Shah, 2005; Abdallah et al., 2012);

d) The proliferation of forms of transnational ‘soft’ regulation, including the various standards that are issued by non-governmental bodies to audit and ensure the quality of a product or service (Power, 1999; Higgins, 2007). Through bodies such as the World Health Organization standard constructs of wellbeing and Quality of Life are fast becoming the basic meta-indices for a range of global social issues;

e) A shift towards replacing systems of state provision for welfare with various discourses and practices of individual wellbeing associated with patient choice, personalized provision, self-management, prevention and so forth, all of which congeal around a theme of individual happiness (Taylor, 2011)

f) An emphasis in the corporate world on positive image and up-beat entrepreneurial optimism as essential features of the labour force. This includes new Human Relations and Personnel Management techniques and strategies to boost wellbeing and to link corporate performance with subjective qualities like resilience and realistic optimism (Knowledge@Wharton, 2009).

In drawing upon Foucault to make sense of this conjuncture we are building upon an extensive body of scholarship concerned with governmentality and neoliberalism. Burchell, Gordon & Miller (1991), Barry, Osborne

and Rose (1996), Rose (1996; 1999), Du Gay (1995) and Dean (1999) among others have described the manifold ways in which neo-liberal forms of government involve vocabularies and techniques through which citizens become invested, at the most intimate and personal level, in the economic and political life of society. Rose's seminal work on the role of psychology within forms of neo-liberal governance is especially relevant here (Rose, 1996; see also Cruickshanks, 1996; Greco, 1993, 1998). There is no doubt that what we will call the happiness *dispositif* can be considered as an extension and intensification of these developments in governmentality which serve to align subjectivities with economic imperatives. However, in tackling happiness as a crystallization point for a functioning network or *dispositif*, we will develop this tradition of scholarship in a direction that gives more attention to the affective issues at play in these economies of power, and to the problem of desire.

In proposing to address the affective dimension as such, beyond its construction in discourse (and associated practices), we depart from the tradition of 'governmentality studies', to offer more than a descriptive account that stops short of suggesting the possibility of an alternative, however speculative the latter may be. In the argument we develop below, we contrast the discursive and empirical normativity of the neo-liberal concept of 'happiness' with the immanent normativity that authors like Canguilhem and Deleuze, in the wake of Spinoza and Nietzsche, associate with the concepts of 'health' and 'joy'. It is not accidental that the thought of each of these authors, from whom we draw inspiration, can be characterized as a form of vitalism, where attention to relationality and process takes precedence over the definition of entities and their properties, the latter being regarded always as the emergent product of an immanent set of relations. By contrast, we propose, the thought that animates the happiness *dispositif* is predicated on the 'bifurcation of nature' that has long informed Western rationality (Whitehead, 1985 [1925]). In the succinct definition offered by Bruno Latour, bifurcation is 'what happens whenever we think the world is divided into two sets of things: one which is composed of the fundamental constituents of the universe – invisible to the eyes, known to science, real and yet valueless – and the other which is constituted of what the mind has to add to the basic building blocks of the world in order to make sense of them' (Latour, 2005, pp. 226-7). A bifurcated approach to questions of happiness and wellbeing, we argue, underlies the scientism, individualism and biologism that many critical commentators have already identified as features of the discourse on wellbeing and of the 'happiness agenda' (see e.g. Furedi, 2004; Held, 2004; Sointu, 2005; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Edwards & Imrie, 2008; Slife & Richardson, 2008; Cromby, 2011).

## II. *Dispositif*, Normativity and Will to Power

It is the heterogeneous nature of the field of problems and interventions that have come to be associated with 'happiness' that leads us to reach for Foucault's concept of a *dispositif*, or apparatus. In an interview from 1977, Foucault describes his use of the concept of *dispositif* in the following way:

What I'm trying to pick out with this term is [...] a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. [...] I understand by the term 'apparatus' a sort of – shall we say – formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. This may have been, for example, the assimilation of a floating population found to be burdensome for an essentially mercantilist economy: there was a strategic imperative acting here as the matrix for an apparatus which gradually undertook the control or subjection of madness, sexual illness and neurosis. (Foucault, 1977, p. 214)

So, for Foucault, a *dispositif* is a set of connective relations that temporarily integrates a thoroughly

heterogenous assemblage of elements in order to respond to an urgent need. We want to make explicit the Nietzschean influence here. For Nietzsche a ‘major point of historical method’ is the need to disambiguate the origin of something from an account of its purpose. As he puts it in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1969, p. 77):

[...] the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed and redirected by some power superior to it [...] purposes and utilities are only *signs* that a will to power has become master of something less powerful and imposed upon it the character of a function; and the entire history of a ‘thing,’ an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another.

For Nietzsche, as for Foucault, something like a law, or an act of punishment, or a discourse on wellbeing, should not be seen as having essential and inherent meaning and purpose. Rather, the character of a function is imposed upon them through their implication in a system of purposes. From Nietzsche’s perspective, that system of purposes is organized and interpreted by what he called a will to power. We can thus think of Nietzsche’s ‘system of purposes’ as a *dispositif* in the sense of a device that arranges and focuses the disposition of the otherwise heterogeneous elements, ‘disposing’ them towards some kind of an urgent need, felt from the perspective of a will to power.

The will to power in this sense is not primarily to be understood as the will of any given individual person, and still less a conscious and linguistically articulated ‘want’. One might just as well say that it is the will of the larger machinic and hybrid creature that is the *dispositif*, and that the *dispositif* serves precisely to organize or machine the affective dispositions of what we come to call ‘individuals’. To make this suggestion is not to deny personal subjectivity, and this is an important point. In fact, abstracting from social context, what we call the subjectivity of an individual person is, from this perspective, nothing but a dominant force that has succeeded in capturing, redirecting and transforming the organic powers and potentials of the socially located body it calls its own. But that body itself, taken in abstraction from its attendant consciousness, is no less analyzable in terms of will to power. The body, for example, is composed of numerous centres of organic activity dominated by the more centralized assemblage of biological organs we call the brain. The brain, to paraphrase Whitehead (1968 [1938]), is a dominant centre that receives its data from numerous more specialist centres, coordinating, redirecting and transforming them in line with its own preferred sphere of activities or ‘system of purposes’. But of course bodies and subjectivities, in concrete reality, are never abstractable from their implication in broader forms of social order. To use a concept from Deleuze and Guattari (1978), the elements of a *dispositif* or assemblage, including the people involved, are *territorialized*.

In fact, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of an *agencement* or machinic assemblage is directly comparable to Foucault’s *dispositif* except that where Foucault stresses the integrating or form-giving factor of *power* Deleuze and Guattari stress *desire*. The difference here, it seems to us, can be significant, but in fact is a matter of what is emphasized in the phrase ‘will to power’. Of the Nietzschean phrase ‘will to power’, Deleuze stresses will (desire) and Foucault stresses power. Both power and desire are clearly at play in Nietzsche’s strangely potent core concept of the will to power. That is to say, Nietzsche stressed the affective nature of will to power. Hence he wrote, ‘My theory would be that *will to power* is the primitive form of affect, that all other affects are only developments of it’ (1968, p. 366). Elsewhere, he also describes will as a ‘passion’ and as a ‘feeling’. For Nietzsche, affects, feelings, passions and emotions are forms of will and will is affect. Affects like jealousy and fear are thus configurations of the will to power. They are *form giving forces*. From this perspective, it is affect, as will to power, that lends the heterogeneous elements of a *dispositif* their temporary unity, but the affects involved are themselves wholly a part of the assemblage. The similarity here to Spinoza’s core concept of *conatus* is obvious when Nietzsche remarks of will

to power: ‘To *feel stronger*, or, to express it differently, joy – always presupposes comparison (but not necessarily with others; rather, with oneself, within a state of growth, and without first knowing to what extent one is comparing)’ (1968, p. 485).

Thus we come from Foucault to a Spinozist, Nietzschean, Deleuzian concept of joy as the feeling of an increase in one’s powers to affect things, coupled with an increase in one’s powers to be affected. When power is understood in this Spinozist way, joy is inseparable from the actualization of power. It is the feeling of becoming more active in the world or, to put it differently, of becoming part of a bigger world which one participates in organizing and creating. ‘[I]t is notably enlightening’, writes Nietzsche, ‘to posit *power* in place of individual “happiness” (after which every living thing is supposed to be striving)’ (1968, p. 366). The influence of this form of thought is clearly recognizable also in George Canguilhem’s definition of health as normativity, as distinct from and opposed to normality (1989). To be healthy is to have a (relatively greater) margin of freedom with respect to the norms set by an external environment; to be healthy is to have the (relatively greater) capacity to live according to one’s own norms, and to construct one’s environment to correspond with these. In this sense, health *qua* power involves actively lending form to the world and joy is the experience of this information.

This might seem a promising start for understanding the concepts of happiness and wellbeing that have come to circulate so widely in today’s societies. But in fact, we propose, this concept of joy serves better as a critical point of contrast to what is nowadays typically articulated as ‘happiness’ or ‘wellbeing’. To put it bluntly, Seligman’s ‘happiness’ and Nietzsche’s ‘joy’ could not be further apart. To understand why, it is necessary first to reiterate that this Spinozist and Nietzschean tradition of positive psychology, if we may call the ‘gay science’ that, demands a completely different way of thinking. As just suggested, when Spinoza writes of *conatus* or when Nietzsche writes of *will to power* they do not have in mind just the activities of human beings, but of all events, whether physical, organic, psychological or political. Furthermore, will to power cuts across these categorical distinctions, forging connections and translations which pattern heterogeneities into novel forms. These psychologies thus operate within a pan-experiential philosophy stressing our involvement in the ultimate immanent unity of a plural universe, for which there can be no possibility of a transcendental vantage point.

From this perspective it is not a question simply of tracing a will to power – or the joy associated with it – back to a subject, an individual, that might have willed it or experienced it. As Nietzsche (1969, p. 45) put it, ‘there is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything’. This style of thinking, in short, resolutely refuses to separate the subjective from the objective. It refuses to treat, for example, experiences of happiness or misery as if they were a merely subjective matter that has nothing to do with a real world; and it refuses to consider the real world as a meaningless and objective matter that has nothing to do with the experiences and desires of subjects, because it is simply ‘the way things really are and have to be’. Joy, to repeat, is defined by Spinoza and Nietzsche as the feeling of becoming more active in the world. The affects are an integral aspect of the art of life. That is to say: of the creative activity of lending form to one’s own real existence, collective and individual. A turn to affect and an interest in joy and happiness thus become indispensable to psychology, but this is a turn which does not separate the feelings from what is felt and that does not consign emotions to an expressive domain purified away from an instrumental domain of material reality, political practice and collective action.

In this paper we suggest that a defining characteristic of the contemporary happiness *dispositif* is precisely the feature of splitting the subject from their world; of treating feelings and desires as purely internal, individual and subjective affairs; and of effectively cutting people off from any of their powers that do not correspond to a limited mode of entrepreneurial subjectivity and practice. Furthermore, if there is an urgent need addressed by way of this *dispositif* then that is the need, not just to re-produce and foster a neoliberal form of subjectivity, but also to manage



the misery, neuroticism, pessimism and general disenchantment generated *en masse* by the globalized market forces associated with neoliberalism. In this connection, we propose that the happiness *dispositif* is intimately related to another contemporary phenomenon that has similarly attracted much debate and controversy, namely the exponential growth in both the scope and estimated prevalence of psychiatric diagnoses. While we broadly agree with Rose (2006, p. 480) that ‘these disorders [...] are experienced and coded as such, by individuals and their doctors, in relation to a cultural norm of the active, responsible, choosing self’, and that ‘they are given form by the availability of [psychiatric] categories’ our emphasis, unlike Rose’s, will be on the side of (affective, embodied, vital) *experiencing* rather than that of (cognitive) *coding*. The ‘cultural norm’ embodied in the ideal subject of neoliberalism is, of course, neither a purely cultural norm nor an isolated norm; it correlates with socio-economic norms of increased flexibility and precarity in the labour market and with the privatization and individualization of social risks, which translate into concrete effects in people’s lives. All these contribute, we argue, to the emergence of a subject that may be described as the concrete, affective and affected twin of the neoliberal abstraction known as *homo oeconomicus*.

### III. Economic Bliss and Neurotic Hell: Happiness in a Bifurcated World

Richard Easterlin’s observation that beyond a minimum income threshold increased affluence does not predict increased happiness is typically cited as a reason to question the value of devoting energies solely to increasing wealth (Layard, 2005; Schwartz, 2004; Easterbrook, 2003; Myers, 2000). In this section, we will examine an informative precedent of the ‘Easterlin paradox’ and the associated discourse of so-called affluenza, found in the writings of British economist John Maynard Keynes. We use this precedent to illustrate how the concept of happiness at stake in this discourse is one predicated on the assumption of a bifurcated reality – one composed of the ‘primary’, factual qualities of objects or phenomena on the one hand, and of the ‘secondary’ and subjective qualities that define experience on the other hand. We will argue that, while ostensibly dissociating happiness from the capitalist accumulation of wealth, the Easterlin paradox strictly speaking bifurcates the two, that is, ascribes a different ontological status to each. In this discourse, capital has the ontological status of a ‘fundamental constituent’ of the reality of happiness, while feelings have the status of subjective and thus illusory qualities that (for the sake of our own *true* happiness) we should learn not to trust.

In an article published in 1930 during the Great Depression, Keynes diagnoses a ‘bad attack of economic pessimism’ (2009 [1930], pp. 192-3). He warns against the grave dangers of two kinds of pessimism: that which fuels the revolutionaries to radical change and that which motivates the reactionaries to avoid any risks. To counter this pessimism he urges us to think 100 years ahead about the ‘economic possibilities for our Grandchildren’, that is to say, us. He reassures us that by 2030 it is likely that what he calls the ‘economic problem’ of humanity – namely the subsistence problem of guaranteeing all of our basic needs – will, for the first time in human history, be solved for all British people. After all, he argues, ‘in 1929 the physical output of the industry of Great Britain was greater than ever before, and the net surplus of our foreign balance... was greater last year than that of any other country, being indeed 50 per cent greater than the corresponding surplus of the United States’ (p. 193).

Keynes associates this economic greatness with what he calls the ‘modern age’ of the accumulation of capital. He traces the beginnings of that modern age to the sixteenth century and, specifically, ‘to the rise of prices, and the profits to which that led, which resulted from the treasure of gold and silver which Spain brought from the New World into the Old’ (p. 194). He then traces the beginnings of British foreign investment ‘to the treasure which Drake stole from Spain in 1580’ (p. 195). Queen Elizabeth made £40,000 personal profit from her investment in Drake’s piracy, which she invested in the Levant Company. The profits of this company were then invested to found



the East India Company which, of course, was basically the foundation of England's subsequent 'foreign investment'. Keynes claims we should not be pessimistic because we should trust in the economic logic of compound interest. Elizabeth's investment based on Drake's theft from the Spanish thieves almost guarantees our prosperity. As Keynes puts it, citing the fate of Elizabeth's profit:

Now it happens that £40,000 accumulating at 3 ½ per cent compound interest approximately corresponds to the actual volume of England's foreign investments at various dates, and would actually amount to-day to the total of £4,000,000,000 which I have already quoted as being what our foreign investments now are. Thus every £1 which Drake brought home in 1580 has now become £100,000. Such is the power of compound interest! (p. 195)

It is by projecting this calculation forward that Keynes is able to predict that by 2030 we will have reached – thanks to compound interest and the science and technology it makes possible – our destination of the practical removal of economic necessity for a large section of humanity. But this scenario of economic bliss, he warns, is not all roses. In fact, solving the economic problem will rob the human race of its traditional purpose, a purpose that has governed the evolution of all of our instincts and habits. Indeed, if it is the case that we are even made *happy* by the satisfactions of labouring for our subsistence, then solving the 'economic problem' risks throwing us collectively into further depression or even nervous breakdown: 'a nervous breakdown of the sort which is already common enough in England and the United States amongst the wives of the well-to-do classes, unfortunate women, many of them, who have been deprived by their wealth of their traditional tasks and occupations – who cannot find it sufficiently amusing, when deprived of the spur of economic necessity, to cook and clean and mend, yet are quite unable to find anything more amusing' (p. 198).

Here we have the same 'paradox' of wealth failing to correlate with happiness that we find reiterated in the Easterlin paradox, in Myer's book *The American Paradox* (2000), in Easterbrook's book *The Progress Paradox* (2003), in Schwartz's book *The Paradox of Choice* (2004) and in Layard's *Happiness: Lessons For a New Science* (2005), to name but a few in this contagious genre. But Keynes takes it further. He argues that if we are not to squander in depression and nervous breakdown the economic bliss won for us by the 'strenuous purposeful money-makers', then we must cultivate what he calls 'the art of life itself' (2009 [1930], p. 198). We must live agreeably and wisely, sharing out the little work that is to be done, ridding ourselves of outdated pseudo-moral principles, and cultivating true values that elevate ends above means. The love of money as a possession, for example, 'will be recognized for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease' (p. 199).

This idea of an 'art of life' is worth dwelling on because it is a central concept in the thought of Nietzsche, Whitehead, Deleuze and Foucault (see Brown, 2001; Brown & Stenner, 2009; Greco, 2009; Stenner, 2011). Keynes' concept of the art of life is rather different. It is set up as part of a strict dualism, the other side of which is the *means of life*. It is in this respect that it anticipates key themes in the happiness *dispositif*. Keynes' art of life, in other words, is purely expressive, and presupposes the real, instrumental activities of the 'purposeful money makers'. The cultivation of lasting happiness is conceived only on the basis of a real underlying unchallengeable instrumental and economic reality, which serves as its foundation. Happiness is just icing on a cake built out of the necessity of theft, greed and merciless exploitation. In fact, it is an icing that you never quite get to eat. That is to say, the time for the art of life is always deferred, always 'not yet'. As Keynes puts it so very clearly: 'But beware! The time for all this is not yet. For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves that fair is foul and that foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can

lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight' (p. 201).

In Keynes, this economic rhetoric is explicitly bound up with an attempt to manage the misery, pessimism and general disenchantment not just of those opposed to integrated world capitalism, but also of those who otherwise profit from it. The beautiful art of life must wait upon the ugly means of life. The instrumental dimension is typically kept separate from a discourse of affect and desire by being presented as a transcendental necessity, an unavoidable foundation. And yet where Keynes does touch upon the affects and desires associated with the supposed necessity of capital accumulation, they are distinctly foul and negative: they are inspired, as he puts it, by the gods of avarice and usury. If we could afford it, we would recognise the affects composing this desire as a 'somewhat disgusting morbidity'. This judgement does not even take into account the costs to the millions who were exploited under British imperialism. The will to power associated with Keynes's 'modern age of the accumulation of capital' thus operates by separating and juxtaposing the *fact* of a supposedly unavoidable economic system and the *value* of (ever-deferred) happiness. In this sense the value of capital accumulation – that is to say, capital accumulation *qua* value – is blackboxed, set beyond questioning or scrutiny. While itself not sufficient to guarantee happiness, economic growth is assumed by Keynes to be a *sine qua non* for it, pre-empting the question of whether and to what extent this imperative of growth might, instead, be involved in sustaining the conditions for *un*-happiness.

#### IV. The Joys of Abstraction: Learned Happiness as the Antidote to 'Learned Helplessness'

In Keynes' essay we see the speculations of a British economist on the question of happiness, and the mobilization of 'happiness' as a device for the management of pessimism, in an economic context defined by a global depression. It was not until much later, however, and from within a very different cultural as well as political-economic context, that happiness became the fulcrum of a problematization around which a whole *dispositif* explicitly congealed. To return to the Nietzschean terminology we introduced earlier, the 'system of purposes' within which the concept of happiness has been mobilized since the late 1990s is at least *prima facie* very different to the one in which Keynes was implicated, and that 'Keynesian economics' – rightly or wrongly – has come to be identified with (cf. Peacock, 1993). This is not to say that there is not also a certain *prima facie* continuity to be found between the two. In his President's Address to the American Psychological Society in 1998, a speech now famous for inaugurating the field of positive psychology, Martin Seligman echoes Keynes in drawing a distinction between a society concerned with enhancing its material wealth, and a society concerned with the good life:

Entering a new millennium, we face a historical choice. Standing alone on the pinnacle of economic and political leadership, the United States can continue to increase its material wealth while ignoring the human needs of our people and of the people on the rest of the planet. Such a course is likely to lead to increasing selfishness, alienation between the more and the less fortunate, and eventually to chaos and despair... At this juncture, psychology can play an enormously important role. We can articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound and, at the same time, understandable and attractive. We can show the world what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, to flourishing communities, and to a just society... Ideally, psychology should be able to help document what kind of families result in the healthiest children, what work environments support the greatest satisfaction among workers, and what policies result in the strongest civic commitment. (Seligman, 1998, para. 10-12)

Unlike Keynes in 1930, Seligman in 1998 spoke from the vantage point of a period of economic boom. It seemed, then, that Keynes's purposeful money makers had done their work of solving the economic problem and that the time was ripe at last to 'turn our attention toward understanding and building the best things in life' (Gillham & Seligman, 1999, p. 168, cited in Yen, 2010, p. 71). It would now be down to the science of psychology to build on the hard work of the money-makers and to steer us towards a flourishing life of wellbeing, or what Keynes had referred to as the 'art of life'.

The rhetorical strategies adopted to promote and rationalise the positive psychology movement have changed over time in response to political events (e.g. 9/11) and to different economic circumstances (see Yen, 2010 for an analysis). The underlying assumptions of the new discipline, however, have remained stable. Seligman's vision, like Keynes', is based upon an understanding of reality as strictly bifurcated into the material and the mental, the objective and the subjective, the instrumental and the expressive, yielding a concept of the 'art of life' that is the result of a double abstraction. As the object of a psychological discipline focused on the individual, the art of life is addressed as something not immanent to, but separate from the world of material and economic relationships, the latter deemed to exist as if in a parallel universe of socio-economic facts over which psychology has no direct purchase. The reference to 'work environments' in the speech cited above might superficially suggest otherwise, namely that the new science of happiness would study and yield prescriptions on how to transform social and economic conditions as well as individual or subjective perceptions. The concrete meaning of this reference, however, and the scope of the external conditions that might be addressed through positive psychology, remain entirely undefined in Seligman's grand vision. The improvement of a 'work environment' could in theory range from macroeconomic interventions designed to provide more secure conditions of employment, to the corporate provision of CBT-based stress management workshops or the integration of gym facilities within office premises: in the neoliberal climate of privatization and economic deregulation, the UK and the US have seen plenty of the latter and very little of the former. Moreover, while such interventions might yield measurable evidence of 'satisfaction among workers', whether and how such satisfaction might correspond to what an individual would recognise as happiness is by no means self-evident. More plausibly, local interventions such as the provision of a gym at the workplace are interventions that facilitate a certain *adaptation* of individuals to the requirements of their 'work environment' less narrowly conceived – a point to which we shall return below.

These considerations lead us to the second sense in which abstraction is at play in the ambition of positive psychology to provide us with a science of happiness. This is the abstraction from lived reality that is implicit in any substitution of objective indices and meta-indices for subjective and affective experience. Gabriel Tarde, with reference to the tendency of political economists to operate on a similarly abstract level, described this as an 'obsession' with method and a form of 'contempt' for lived reality itself (Tarde, 2007 [1902], p. 627):<sup>1</sup>

[T]he error of the first architects of political economy and of their successors has been that of persuading themselves that, in order to unify their speculations into a scientific corpus, the only means, but the certain means, was to attend to the material and external aspect of things, or, when this proved impossible, to attend to the abstract, rather than the concrete, aspect of things. ... The ideal was to conceal under abstractions such as credit, service and work, the sensations and feelings underlying them, so that no one could notice them,

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<sup>1</sup> In a discourse analytic account of the self-presentations of positive psychology as a movement, Barbara Held (2004) has identified a similar contempt among its leading representatives for the 'wrong kind of positivity', usually associated with humanistic psychology, for its alleged lack of scientificity. Held describes this as one of several 'negative sides' of positive psychology.

and to treat abstractions as objects: real and material objects analogous to the objects treated by the chemist or the physicist and, as with them, falling under the law of number and measurement. Similarly, the rubric of money and finances, where this twofold ideal seems to be realised, where everything seems to be denumerable and measureable just as in physics or chemistry, has always been the economists' hobbyhorse. Having said that, it remains true that value, of which money is but the sign, is nothing, absolutely nothing, if it is not a combination of entirely subjective things, of beliefs and desires, of ideas and volitions... (pp. 629-630)

Tarde's own project for an 'economic psychology' was intended to reverse this tendency, and to reinvent political economy – starting from its most basic categories – as a field predicated on the subjectivity of desires. His approach could not be further from what constitutes the field of economic psychology today or, for that matter, the field of happiness economics. Both these fields are typically described as a 'combination' of two distinct disciplines (or three, when including sociology), each concerned with delivering objective and abstract measures of value. In what looks like a remarkable *folie à deux* (or *à plusieurs*), when the abstractions of one discipline are acknowledged to be simplified and schematic to the point of implausibility, those of another discipline (a subject *presumed to know*) are invoked to fill in the details. Instead of reflecting on the conditional norms of use of their respective abstract concepts, the disciplines involved each delegate to the other the task of compensating for the process of abstraction itself. In this manner, their engagement fosters a doubly fallacious illusion of concreteness.

The idea that indices of 'happiness' – such as Gross National Happiness (or GNH)<sup>2</sup> – should supplement purely economic indices and targets constitutes a reactivation of the old utilitarian dream of maximizing aggregate happiness (or at least measures of it) as part of a social welfare function (see Layard, 2005). The concept of aggregate happiness has long been associated with the ambition of providing a scientific foundation for policy. An allusion to the rigour of natural science was certainly at play in Jeremy Bentham's dream of a 'felicific calculus' and in Edgeworth's book entitled *Mathematical Psychics: An Essay on the Application of Mathematics to the Moral Sciences* (1881). In fact, however, the objectivity and neutrality of aggregated subjective self-report data on happiness and wellbeing are notoriously questionable on multiple levels. Laying aside long-standing criticisms of the practice of aggregating self-report data (Whitehead, 1935; Danziger, 1990), at the level of individual questionnaire responses there is an irreducible performative dimension that is greatly amplified as soon as respondents become aware that their responses might influence political decisions (these raw data are better termed 'creata'). Further down the line, at the level of political use, governments, corporations and pressure groups have an impressive track record of 'massaging' statistics, selecting those that suit prior interests, and inventing new metrics where those that exist fail to serve those interests.<sup>3</sup> Any image of neutrality, in other words, depends upon a thoroughly naïve acceptance of the idea that 'governments are composed of purely benevolent politicians wanting to make the population as happy as possible'! (Frey & Stutzer, 2007).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The expression was coined in 1972 by the fourth Dragon King of the state of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Bhutan became the first country to declare GNH as its official yardstick for measuring social progress, a fact that has attracted considerable media attention as well as critical commentary.

<sup>3</sup> See Chrystal and Mizen's (2003) discussion of Goodhart's law and the Lucas critique.

<sup>4</sup> To give just two of many disturbing examples, Alesina et al. (2004) assembled data to suggest that growing inequality of incomes in the US has had little influence on national happiness over the past 25 years, and John Helliwell et al. (unpublished paper cited in Bok, 2010), set about 'finding' that levels of trust are lower amongst

In proposing to consider the emergent science of happiness as a constituent element in a *dispositif*, we are precisely proposing that it cannot be abstracted from a specific politico-historical conjuncture defined by complex relations between mutually reinforcing elements. In the UK, as we and others have already noted, the conjuncture as a whole is strongly characterized by the neoliberal expansion of free market techniques beyond traditional business domains and into the fields of health, education, and previously state-owned and state-managed infrastructure. In this context, the science of happiness has been at the forefront of what has been described as a transition from *welfare* to *wellbeing* (Stenner & Taylor, 2008; Taylor, 2011). This transition has political, economic and cultural dimensions, and involves a transformation of how individuals are invited to think about themselves in relation to their own capacities and those of the state. The emphasis on rights associated with a culture of welfare – where rights were seen as necessary for the exercise of citizenship – has been supplanted by an emphasis on individual duties and responsibilities. What Cameron’s Conservatives call the *New Welfare Contract* equates ‘old’ welfare entitlements and expectations with the notion of a morally despicable ‘free ride’.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the clearest example of how the new science of happiness is implicated in this transition is the creation, following proposals by LSE-based economist Richard Layard in 2005, of a CBT-based programme called *Improving Access to Psychological Therapies* (IAPT). IAPT is the most conspicuous national-level policy initiative issuing directly from the recommendations of a leading ‘happiness economist’. The economic reasoning behind it is that the costs of increasing the wellbeing of those who are unemployed, or risk unemployment, due to mental health problems, will be more than recouped by the government through savings on incapacity benefits (assuming, of course, that the therapy works). This proposition, though still reliant in principle on the existence of a publicly funded health service, marries well with a broader political culture where welfare (including incapacity benefits) is seen as a very expensive evil that discourages people from working and generates dependency instead of fostering a sense of personal responsibility for one’s circumstances. As Taylor (2011, p. 786) has put it: ‘Happiness economics and the positive psychology movement [...] come together around the notion that wellbeing is achieved when individuals are able to act autonomously to achieve maximum individual happiness independently of so-called welfare dependency’.<sup>6</sup> A focus on ‘wellbeing’ appears particularly expedient in a context where the mechanisms previously designed to provide a safety net against social ills are being progressively dismantled. In his efforts to redefine social policy as the promotion of wellbeing, Hartley Dean (2010, p. 100) unwittingly underscores precisely this point when he notes that ‘the advantage of wellbeing as a term is that it can turn our attention to the positive aspects of social policy’, while presumably diverting it from the less appetising ones.

In the context of this broad and multi-dimensional transition from welfare to wellbeing, it is not difficult to accommodate two supposedly very different sides of Martin Seligman’s career as a psychologist. Before championing positive psychology through a rhetoric that hailed the movement as a radical and revolutionary

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employees in unionised plants than plants with no unions, and that lower levels of trust predict lower levels of happiness. The policy implications of this kind of alliance between psychology and political economy seem clear.

<sup>5</sup> Illustrations of this political culture could be drawn from the discourse of New Labour as much as from that of the Conservative-LibDem coalition (not to mention Thatcherism), and they are too numerous to include here. For a discussion of continuities and similarities see <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/christopher-barrie/from-welfare-to-workfare-how-helping-hand-became-contract>

<sup>6</sup> See also Edwards and Imrie, 2008 for a critique from the vantage point of disability studies.



departure from the discipline's past focus on pathology and the negative (see Held, 2004; Yen, 2010), Seligman was famous for his studies demonstrating 'learned helplessness' in dogs. Seligman 'trained' (tortured?) dogs under two conditions: a condition (escape-avoidance training in a shuttle box) in which they could escape his carefully administered painful electric shocks, and a condition in which these were 'unavoidable' (the dogs were shocked whilst rendered immobile in a Pavlovian hammock). Here is Seligman's (1972) rather lurid description of the results of his 'training' comparison:

When an experimentally naïve dog receives escape-avoidance training in a shuttle box, the following behaviour typically occurs: at the onset of the first painful electric shock, the dog runs frantically about, defecating, urinating and howling, until it accidentally scrambles over the barrier and so escapes the shock. On the next trial, the dog, running and howling, crosses the barrier more quickly than on the preceding trial [sic]. This pattern continues until the dog learns to avoid the shock altogether. We have found a striking difference between this pattern of behaviour and that exhibited by dogs first given uncontrollable electric shocks in a Pavlovian hammock. Such a dog's first reactions to shock in the shuttle box are much the same as those of a naïve dog. However, in drastic contrast to a naïve dog, a typical dog which has experienced uncontrollable shocks before avoidance training soon stops running and howling and sits or lies, quietly whining, until shock terminates. The dog does not cross the barrier and escape from shock. Rather, it seems to give up and passively accepts the shock. On succeeding trials, the dog continues to fail to make escape movements and takes as much shock as the experimenter chooses to give. (Seligman, 1972, p. 407)

Following his suggestions, Seligman's tortured dogs rapidly provided an analogue in the psychological literature for certain forms of depression amongst human beings (Abramson et al., 1978). It does not take a great deal of imagination to draw the further parallel between dogs that learn to be helpless and people who learn to 'give up' and 'passively accept' a situation of welfare dependency. Learned helplessness, in other words, is the genealogical antecedent and flip-side of what Seligman would come to call 'authentic happiness'. On the one hand, the helpless dog is the depressed, unemployed, irresponsible and sickly passive consumer of mass state *welfare*. On the other hand, the analogue of the frantically running, howling, defecating, urinating dog able to quickly learn the tricks of its sadistic superior is the attentive, responsive, ever-available and ever-enterprising subject of individual *wellbeing*. This latter is the kind of dog portrayed by Will Smith in the 2006 film *The Pursuit of Happyness* [sic]. A hard-working but failed salesman, Smith's character Christopher Gardener is abandoned by his wife and loses his house, his bank account and credit cards. Forced to live with his young son on the streets of San Francisco, Gardener does not loose heart but struggles on, eventually succeeding by great pains to gain an unpaid stockbroker internship position. Treated as dogsbody to be abused and exploited by his established colleagues, Gardener nevertheless determines to remain positive, attentive and enterprising. Against all odds, he finally succeeds in his gruelling apprenticeship (since he makes a good deal of cash for the corporation out of very little) and is offered a paid position in the prestigious firm. That reward of 'happiness' is the end of the story. The relentless and unapologetic cruelty of a massively divided capitalist society remains entirely taken for granted and indeed celebrated in the story. He too, it seems, has now earned the right to be the one who delivers the shocks rather than the one who receives them. To adapt Deleuze (1992), we might say that the old dog of Fordist state welfare (broken into docile obedience by discipline) becomes the new dog of the societies of control (incited to frenetic self-interested activity under the detailed surveillance of corporate identification).

The moral lesson delivered by *The Pursuit of Happyness* is abstracted from the socio-economic system within which the story takes place, in the same way that the psychological lesson delivered by Seligman's experiments is abstracted from his experimental apparatus. While the observer's gaze is focused on whether or not the dog is trained in escape-avoidance, the broader condition of living under circumstances akin to torture is taken for granted as a background fact of existence for all the dogs involved in the experiment. Yet it is only against such a



background that the situation of the dogs that have been trained in escape-avoidance appears comparatively happier. On the basis of this analogy we suggest that positive psychology can be read as a psychology of ‘learned happiness’ designed to yield subjects trained in coping with a social environment that presents specific challenges to mental health. In our next and concluding section we will draw on Engin Isin’s outline of the concept of ‘neuroliberal governance’ (2004) to argue that neoliberal governance, in so far as it engages desires and affects, generates and thrives not on happiness, but on neurosis.

## V. Neuroliberal Governmentality: Happiness as Neurotic ideal

In a book entitled *Consumption and Identity at Work* published in 1995, Paul Du Gay examined how, during the Thatcher years in the UK, a management discourse of ‘excellence’ and a political rationality of ‘enterprise’ served to link together the economic objectives of business, the political objectives of de-regulation and privatization, and the ‘self-actualizing and self-regulating capacities of human subjects’ into what he called a ‘functioning network’. There are only two mentions of happiness in Du Gay’s book (1995, pp. 64 and 138), neither of which refer to what would become known, in the subsequent decade, as the ‘happiness agenda’. This absence reflects, in part, the fact that in 1995 positive psychology was not yet the social and scientific phenomenon it has since become. But it also reflects a typical assumption, in the literature on governmentality, that the subject at the centre of neoliberal governmentality is a subject defined by its capacities for calculation, rationality and autonomy. Affectivity, emotion and desire do not feature in this characterization. In contrast to this assumption, Isin (2004) argues that affectivity and emotion increasingly feature in various practices of governance that address themselves to the fears, anxieties and insecurities that subjects experience in a social climate defined by multiple and radical uncertainty – in relation for example to their socio-economic position, or to the environment, or to their own bodies. What Isin calls ‘neuroliberal governance’ is a form of governance that addresses itself to subjects as neurotic beings and incites them to adjust their conduct ‘not via calculating habits but soothing, appeasing, tranquillizing, and, above all, managing anxieties and insecurities’ (Isin, 2004, p. 226).

Isin’s reference to neurosis may appear as a strident anachronism, given the extent to which the term has lost currency in the field of psychiatry since the publication of DSM-III in 1980. In deliberately retrieving this concept – particularly in the more sociologically-informed variant proposed by Karen Horney – the intention however is precisely to reclaim the social and cultural determinants of anxiety that have been gradually edited out of increasingly biologicistic psychiatric accounts. The point, however, is not to offer a psychodynamic explanation of collective and social processes based, as in many examples of psychosocial research, on assumptions about the hidden structure of the human mind. In line with a Foucauldian sensibility, in Isin’s account the ‘truth’ of neurotic subjectivity is to be found rather on the surface of discourse: it is a truth that individuals are routinely invited to speak about themselves – and which they volunteer to speak – in their attempts to construct themselves as viable, successful citizens of the ne(ur)oliberal polity. In the context of this analysis it is significant, as well as symptomatic, that the invitation is not made through the category of ‘neurosis’ but rather through those of ‘depression’ and of a whole spectrum of ‘anxiety disorders’ for which the treatments of choice tend to be based on individualist and/or biological framings of the problems at stake.

We have already alluded to Rose’s contention that the exponential growth in the scope and prevalence of psychiatric diagnoses is most plausibly explained as the recoding of human discontents through psychiatric categories. While Rose argues that these disorders are ‘experienced and coded as such ... in relation to a cultural norm of the active, responsible, choosing self’ (2008, p. 408), his account remains resolutely non-committal on the question of whether this cultural norm results in an intensification of dysphoric experience with respect to historical,

social and cultural contexts characterized by different kinds of norms. This, of course, is precisely the kind of question that the new science of happiness seeks to answer, albeit in ways that appear fundamentally misguided, as we have seen. In this conclusion we will forego epistemological security to risk the speculative proposition that the cultural norm identified by Rose is indeed harmful, precisely to the extent that, while facilitating the development of certain powers, it also cuts people off from any of their powers that do not correspond to a limited mode of entrepreneurial subjectivity and practice. We will further suggest that the concepts of ‘happiness’ and ‘wellbeing’ deployed through what we have called the happiness *dispositif* are directly implicated in the intensification of dysphoric sentiments to the extent that they have become part of that cultural norm, and as such constitute a *neurotic ideal* to which individuals aspire and against which they measure themselves.<sup>7</sup>

In order to develop this argument it is worth spending a few words on the intimate relationship that ties the figure of the neoliberal subject to that of the neurotic subject. Where the neoliberal subject is ‘sufficient, calculating, responsible, autonomous and unencumbered’ (Isin, 2004, p. 217), the neurotic subject is ‘someone who is anxious, under stress and increasingly insecure and is asked to manage its neurosis’ (2004, p. 225). But far from being mutually exclusive, the two figures imply and indeed concretely ‘produce each other’ (2004, p. 232). The figure of the neoliberal subject is a neurotic fantasy, an idealized self characterized by perfect autonomy and perfect capacities for rationality and choice. It is a neurotic fantasy that the discourse of neoliberalism concretely fosters and encourages at a collective level, which means that it is a strongly normative neurotic fantasy. The demands and expectations placed on individuals in the name of this idealized form of subjectivity are ‘heroic’ – they involve an overestimation of people’s actual capacities and coping abilities. The neoliberal citizen in its ideal form is a ‘bionic’ citizen – superhuman both in its ambition and in its capacity for control (and subsequent wellbeing). It is not difficult to see then how the neurotic subject might emerge as the other side of this neoliberal coin. The two figures stand in a ‘tension-filled relationship’ (Isin, 2004, p. 223). The anxious subject is the one who simultaneously strives for perfection – perfect information, perfect health, perfect autonomy – and inevitably fails to live up to expectations of perfection.

In these propositions we see most clearly Isin’s reliance on Karen Horney’s account of neurosis, where neurosis is understood as a coping mechanism that develops to deal with basic anxiety. The neurotic person, for Horney (1950), is one who has become alienated from her own feelings, wishes and needs, and who directs all their energies towards the realization of an ideal self. The almost inevitable failure to correspond to this ideal generates self-hatred, self-contempt, and ultimately further anxiety<sup>8</sup>. To the extent that neoliberal rationalities of government remain committed to the fantasy of a ‘bionic citizen’, the anxieties and insecurities of the neurotic subject are an inevitable byproduct. As such, they cannot be regarded as transient pathological states. This is why, in the neuropolitical regime that shadows the neoliberal one, these anxieties and insecurities do not constitute the subject as abnormal or deviant but rather, according to Isin, as an object of tranquillization.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discourse analytic account of the emergence of this ideal and its evolving connotations between 1985 and 2003, see Sointu (2005)

<sup>8</sup> Although a psychoanalyst, Horney drew her decisive inspiration in this respect not from Freud, but from two figures who are central to the process tradition we advocate: Sören Kierkegaard and William James (Horney, 1991[1950], p. 377). For Horney, Freud’s pessimism prevented him from grasping the vital nature of the self and led him to reduce real feelings to materialistically construed modifications of destructive and libidinal forces (p. 378).

How does this relate to the happiness *dispositif* ? Surely – one might object – the whole thrust of the happiness agenda is to produce subjects that are ‘happy’ rather than just tranquillized! Such, indeed, is the ostensible ideal. The empirical reality of where and how initiatives linked to this agenda are being deployed, however, suggests otherwise. In a range of critical interventions, Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) has railed against what she perceives as the increasingly obligatory corporate emphasis on positive image and up-beat entrepreneurial optimism, stressing that work-place based happiness and wellbeing initiatives tend to cluster around scenes of corporate down-sizing. This association of a ‘happiness agenda’ and deteriorating job security is clearly evident in many UK Universities. Reporting for the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in 2010, Melanie Newman illustrated how the current ‘public sector squeeze’ – in which many employees are being forced out of universities, while others inherit larger workloads for diminishing pay – is prominent in the minds of both supporters and critics of wellbeing initiatives. As the then ‘director of wellbeing’ at Leeds University put it:

The aim of wellbeing is to make sure that the people who leave are supported through that process and that the one’s who stay are helped to cope with what’s changed. It’s about rebuilding that connection between employer and employee, making sure that people know where they fit and how they can move forward together as a group. We call it ‘resilience’, while others call it ‘staff engagement’ – it’s all part of the wider wellbeing agenda. (Gary Tideswell, cited in Newman, 2010, para. 21)

Others denounced how the new discourse of emotional wellbeing distorts and distracts from the concrete issues at stake, which typically involve a stark diminution in the powers of those to whom it is addressed:

The clearest example of the therapeutic distortion is union outrage about poor process such as ‘sacking by email’. The complaint is always about the lack of consultation and support. But it’s not the consultation or processes that matter. It’s the sacking. At this point, it might be better for all concerned to suffer a little ‘ill-being’. (Dennis Hayes, cited in Newman, 2010, para. 30)

What Hayes here calls the ‘therapeutic distortion’ which occurs in the name of wellbeing is nothing other than a form of alienation from what Horney would have regarded as the real or more authentic feelings, wishes and needs of the employee, who is thus invited to become complicit in the process of her own sacking. According to Newman (2010, para. 18), even the vice-chair of UK Human Resources, Matthew Knight, has stated that the wellbeing agenda is connected to a ‘wider deterioration in employment conditions’.

To return, then, to our point of departure: the examples above illustrate in a literal sense the way in which the happiness *dispositif* is implicated in quite the opposite of what, through Spinoza and Nietzsche, we have characterized as ‘joy’. The situation of an individual facing compulsory redundancy is one where their powers are concretely and significantly reduced, but in terms that the new discourse of happiness and wellbeing translates as relatively irrelevant to the question of their happiness. This translation, and the multiple techniques through which it is conveyed – techniques ostensibly designed to make negative experiences more tolerable – moreover disconnect the individual from one power that redundancy as such might have otherwise left intact, namely the power of confidence in the intuitive perception of one’s own relative (lack) of power. To the extent that these techniques succeed in blunting the negativity of feeling, they effectively deprive individuals of an arguably vital organ of perception.

This fundamentally misguided approach to the concrete possibility of happiness (or joy), we have argued, has long roots. It reflects a typically Western deep mistrust of subjectivity and thus of experience and feelings as organs of perception and knowledge, a mistrust which is amply evident both in the genealogy and in the current

projects of positive psychology and happiness economics.

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